



## COMPARING L1 WITH L2 ACQUISITION: HOW LEARNING FACTORS AND STAGES REVEAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO PROCESSES

JOHN JAIRO VIÁFARA GONZÁLEZ

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### Abstract

This article reviews some of the literature and research studies which explore first and second language acquisition in order to make a parallel between these two processes. The discussion takes into consideration cognitive, affective and socio-cultural factors which influence the learning of L1 and L2. In addition, a comparison of L1 and L2 language acquisition sequences helps to inform about the similarities and differences.

**Key Words:** First and second language acquisition, Language learning factors, Sequence of acquisition, Language acquisition theories.

### Resumen

Este artículo realiza una revisión de la literatura y de los estudios investigativos que exploran la adquisición de primera y segunda lengua con el fin de hacer un paralelo entre estos dos procesos. La discusión se enfoca en los factores cognitivos, afectivos y socio-culturales que tienen influencia en el aprendizaje de la lengua 1 y la 2. Además, se incluye una comparación entre las secuencias de adquisición de la primera y la segunda lengua lo que ayuda a establecer similitudes y diferencias.

**Palabras clave:** Adquisición de Primera Segunda Lengua, Factores de Aprendizaje de Lenguas, Secuencia de Adquisición, Teorías de Adquisición.

## INTRODUCTION

In attempts to provide substantial explanations about how a second language is learned, scholars have repeatedly looked for answers in individuals' first language acquisition process. In fact, when individuals start their journey to master a second language, they have already accumulated vast experience as language learners. Thus, comparing what happens in the L1 acquisition process in contrast to L2 becomes a meaningful tool not only for researchers, but also for teachers and students searching for explanations in the field.

Starting from some of the most influential theories scholars and researchers have formulated to explain first language acquisition, in the following paper I will discuss similarities and differences between L1 and L2 learning processes. This will include looking at affective, socio-cultural and cognitive factors highlighted in the various theories initially reviewed. In addition, the comparison will look at L1 and L2 language learners' acquisition sequence of some morphemes and their mistakes during the process.

## FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES

Owens (1996) presents a review of the most influential theories which have sought to explain the L1 acquisition through history. Theories first used to explain how people acquired L1 were later employed in trying to explain what might occur in the L2 learning process. In general, much of what influences the L1 process seems to count also in the case of the L2. The theory of behaviorism,

which reduces the language acquisition process to a stimulus-response equation, highlights the relevance that imitation of language patterns have in the acquisition of the L1. The feedback learners receive as a result of their performance either reinforces or punishes them and conditions them for future production attempts.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, Chomsky provides an explanation for first language acquisition based on humans' supposed innate ability for language learning. According to Chomsky, children are born with a LAD (Language Acquisition Device) which contains universal linguistic principles or rules to process language (Owens, 1996, 42).

A social dimension in the L1 language acquisition process has also been stressed in order to explain the complex phenomenon of language learning. Vigotsky's theory underlines the way in which adults, who have more "expertise" as language learners, support children's linguistic and cognitive development through interaction; this theory has also been important in introducing questions about the relationship between language and cognition. In addition, children's need to communicate with people around them is a factor which triggers their language development in L1 and has been underscored by scholars such as Halliday (1986) who provides a classification of the language functions children might fulfill as L1 learners. Finally, taking into consideration that "the process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of society" (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1982, 277), it is worth acknowledging that communities' specific

cultural patterns influence how language learning takes place.

Most of the previous theories focus on the importance that socio-cultural aspects such as a child's surrounding context (i.e., people) have for his or her language learning. Infants are often listening to what adults and other individuals say and how they employ language to interact. Accepting Chomsky's theory regarding the LAD and universal grammar principles (UG), children can handle the language input around them in order to learn. But how does the origin of input, the kind, and the way this input is used contribute to set differences or similarities in individuals' L1 or L2 language acquisition processes?

### **COMPARING L1 AND L2 ACQUISITION: SOCIO-CULTURAL, AFFECTIVE AND COGNITIVE FACTORS**

One of the differences between the learning of the two languages is that, as Hawkins (2001, 345) mentions when he refers to the context in which language is learnt "input is usually encountered differently, and might involve written as well as spoken language". From the beginning of their early L1 language socialization process, children are constantly in contact with adults. Though there might be similarities in the ways how this interaction occurs, Ochs and Schieffelin (1982) and Heat (1983) present cultural variations among white and black Americans, Kaluli, and Samoan societies. For example, adults in the Kaluli society, opt to use teasing and shaming as a means of socialization for their children while African Americans in the Piedmont Carolinas challenge boys so they reveal their communication skills to interact in a kind of

performance for the community. On the whole, parents and others behave linguistically in special ways which guide children to acquire their L1, keeping the specific cultural features of their societies.

In the case of adults acquiring a second language, different situations might take place. To begin with, in an ESL setting, learners might also go through a language socialization process; however, unless it is in a classroom, speakers of the target language do not necessarily act linguistically in ways which can facilitate their learning process. Consciously or subconsciously they can be turned down by proficient users of the target language when they are overcorrected, ridiculed, ignored or silent. L2 learners in pedagogical situations might encounter similarities in how the context in which input is produced might be adapted for them to learn as it can be the case in L1. But even so, in these situations, the amount of input to which FL and SL learners in classrooms are exposed is probably less than that of an L1 learner, at least in terms of opportunities to practice speaking. In addition, this input is not as varied as that to which an L1 or L2 learner, living in the target language community, would be exposed to.

When talking about the input provided by adults to children, it is also relevant to mention the usual affection parents and others have for infants during this process, affection which translates more often than not into increased communicative interactions. On the contrary, L2 learners may not find themselves with the same degree of rich input whether inside or outside the classroom.

Another way in which input is modified during both L1 and L2 language acquisition involves the kind of adjusted speech teachers or more proficient speakers of L2 sometimes use to help a less proficient learner to communicate with them. In her research, Heat (1983, 1221) explains that in order to support children's L1 learning, parents in some societies, for example, white American middle class, vary their speech using "short, simplified sentences, special lexical items, high pitch and exaggerated intonation". The previous finding corresponds to a case of baby or motherese talk.

Similarly during L2 acquisition, Ritchie and Bhatia (1996, 25) explain based on studies in the field that "Nss (native speakers) modify their speech to L2 learners from Nss (that is, on foreign talk) so that input is comprehensible for the learner". Thus in both (L1 and L2) processes, a similar phenomenon has been observed. As L2 learners progress in their communicative skills, their dependence on the kind of variations originated from foreign talk decreases and they use more meaning negotiation based strategies. The previous issue can be true for children learning L1 as well.

All things considered, the purpose of using such baby or foreign talk in both cases of L1 and L2 learning is then to make input comprehensible so that learning can take place. Thus, as Krashen (1985) mentions, exposure to messages which a person can understand is essential for learning to take place. While adults in some societies as the white middle American class mentioned above might work constantly to provide this

input to their children, in SL or FL settings this might or not be done by the teacher, as I have previously discussed it.

Up to this point, the discussion has revolved around the question of input from the perspective of socio-cognitive language acquisition theories. Conversely, from a more mechanist perspective, another similarity that L1 and L2 language acquisition processes share is learners' use of formulaic speech. Ritchie and Bhatia (1996, 13) claim that "L2 learners (particularly children) begin the process of SLA by storing formulaic expressions". Likewise, in regard to L1 as well, Clark (2006, 210) (citing Johnson, 1981 and 1983) specifically remarks how first and second language learners reveal similarities in their formulaic use of frames to ask questions.

Furthermore, both authors agree that as learners evolve in their process they will analyze these initial formulas to build more sophisticated utterances. Similarly, Ritchie and Bhatia (2001, 13) claim that "at sometime in the process learners switch from the storage of such expressions to the development of rules for the L2 that assign these expressions internal structure". This reveals their employment of more complex strategies at the cognitive level.

In general, learners' maturation at the intellectual level has been considered one of the main differentiating factors in the acquisition of L1 and L2 (Singleton, 2004). Going deeper into this issue, Hawkins (2001, 333) points out that in the case of SLA "other components of mind have already matured, whereas arguably FLA and the development of other cognitive capacities go hand in

hand". Consequently, children acquiring their L1 require time to grow intellectually as their parents and their environment support them.

Conversely in L2, adults regularly have solid cognitive skills. Then, they often employ what they know strategically to help themselves in the learning process. Though it is believed that relying excessively on thinking processes can hinder spontaneity and delay learners' talk or writing, interrupting partially or completely the flow of communication; it is also consider that L2 adult learners might seem to be in an advantageous position in comparison to children learning L1 since they can be more purposeful in using their cognitive skills.

Despite the benefits that cognitive maturity can bring to adults when they learn a second language, there is a great deal of controversy in regard to whether and how age limits (or not) L2 acquisition in contrast to what occurs in L1 learning. In regards to L2 learners, (Birdsong, 1999, 1) comments that "Whereas their attainment of full linguistic competence is the birthright of all normal children, adults vary widely in their ultimate level of attainment, and linguistic competence comparable to that of natives is seldom attained". In this respect, the idea of a critical period for learning a second language, which originated from the parallel concept that (Lennemberg, 1967) developed for L1, has been highly influential. However there have been numerous studies involving L2 learners with various language skills, different target languages, and different learning contexts (Bialystok and Hakute, 1999; Birdsong, 1999) which, in their ensemble, have made it impossible to attribute complete validity to either the claim

for a negative or positive effect of age on L2 Learners' acquisition.

The higher cognitive expertise that L2 learners naturally have in order to cope with their L2 acquisition process raises another point of contrast between L1 and L2 learning. The presence of a first language at the time individuals start learning the L2 has been pointed out as a substantial factor (Hawkins, 2001; Bialystok and Hakute, 1999). Scholars are divided between those who consider that the L1 supports the L2 process and those who think it hinders it. In fact, Littlewood (1984) advocates for a constructive view about the role of the L1 in the L2 acquisition, and talks about the transfer that learners make from one language to the other as a strategy in their normal process.

Turning back to the idea of a possible critical period, another factor which scholars point to as relevant when comparing the L1 and L2 language acquisition processes is what is known as Universal Grammar (UG): "the system of principles and computational procedures which define and place limits on the form that grammars for human languages can take" (Hawkins, 2001, 346). Thus, Universal Grammar, a concept present in Chomsky's psycholinguistic theory briefly mentioned above, would be a necessary resource for children to acquire their first language. But would it play any role in the process of L2 learners in acquiring their second language? One might think so, however there have been studies which have insinuated that UG is exclusively available for the language processes of L1 learners and young L2 learners (those within the critical period) (Hawkins, 347). More

recently it has been said “much research indicates that post-pubertal L2 learners deal in the same way as L1 acquirers with features purportedly having a UG basis (Singleton and Ryan, 2004, 104).” Acknowledging the existence of UG and agreeing on its role in L1 and L2 language acquisition is also an argument to support the possibility of similar developmental sequences in both (L1 and L2) processes at the morphological level, for instance.

### **L1 and L2 Sequence of Acquisition**

Similarities and differences between L1 and L2 language acquisition not only involve factors around these processes but also the sequence in which language is learned. In regard to the production of language, similarities have been found in the sequence of morpheme acquisition. Based on Ritchie and Bhatia (1996) who cite the work of several scholars, L1 and L2 English learners incorporate the morpheme “-ing”/ articles “a, the” and the past morpheme “-ed”, following a similar order. In the same vein, Mitchell and Myles (1998) conduct an extensive review of research which also reveals that despite some divergences, similarities in terms of the sequence of acquisition of various morphemes by L1 and L2 learners across various languages are recurrent. Parallels have also been established when analyzing the sequence of comprehension of utterances. Singleton and Ryan (2004) cite the work of Cook (1973) who found that the way in which L1 and L2 English learners undertook the comprehension of relative clauses was similar.

The fact that for both L1 and L2 learners the acquisition of certain morphemes (e.g.,

third person singular marker “s” or the “-ed” past tense construction) is challenging has attracted scholars’ attention. It has been concluded that in both L1 and L2 processes, acquisition of morphemes proceeds from less marked to more marked structures (Ritchie and Bhatia, 2004, 11). Similarly, these challenges have guided researchers to look at the mistakes committed by learners as they evolve during their process, and it has been found that these errors are alike between L1 and L2 learners (Singleton and Ryan, 2004, 112).

For example, after learning the use of the -ed morpheme for simple past, L1 and L2 English learners often demonstrate incorrect use of this structure at times by adding this particle even to irregular verbs. Finally, despite the fact that L1 and L2 learners both make this similar mistake, L2 learners reveal appropriate knowledge of certain morphological structures. For instance, they might commit a mistake and shortly thereafter they might use that particular morpheme in the correct way in which it was learned. Variation is “attributed to both the greatest richness in cognitive ability and activity in the more mature L2 learner than in the L1 learner and the relative instability of IL systems over the course of acquisition (Ritchie and Bhatia, 2004,20)”.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The various language acquisition theories scholars have formulated through history, initially for L1, have centered on a broad variety of social, psychological, cognitive, and cultural factors which can help in our understanding of how the L1 and L2 processes are alike or different.

Nonetheless, coming to indisputable conclusions about several of the issues previously reviewed has been a challenge for researchers.

In regard to similarities, the exposition of learners to modified input appears in both language acquisition situations. Furthermore, individuals developing their communicative skills in their L1 or L2 evolve from the storage and apparent mechanical use of formulaic speech into the negotiation and analysis of these formulas and spontaneous speech. Studies have also revealed similarities not only in how the L1 and L2 learners of a language follow a sequence in the acquisition of several morphemes, but also in the kind of errors they made through the process.

Among the perceived differences, scholars have listed the way input is encountered by first and second language learners. Cultural differences in how learners are guided to acquire their L1 and the affective contact that experienced speakers establish with learners during the process are examples of differences which affect the quality and quantity of input individuals are exposed to in each case. Finally, two of the issues scholars continue debating are the existence of a critical period and of a universal grammar for L1 and L2.

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#### THE AUTHOR

JOHN JAIRO VIÁFARA is an associate professor at UPTC in Tunja. He holds a B.Ed in Education (English) from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, a Master in Applied Linguistics from Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas and currently is a Fulbrighter studying his PH.D at The University of Arizona. His interests include pre-service and in-service teacher education, pedagogical research and ELT Methodology.